The Mauritius Cuckoo-Shrike *Coracina typica*: from egg to adult

Roger Safford

Le nid, les oeufs, les oisillons et les plumages juvénile, sub-adulte et adulte de l'Echenilleur de Maurice Coracina typica sont décrits et illustrés. Contrairement aux autres espèces d'échenilleurs de la région afrotropicale et malgache, les plumages du mâle et de la femelle de l'Echenilleur de Maurice sont nettement différents et le jeune connaît un développement lent mais avec des plumages colorés. En cela, il ressemble à deux espèces d'échenilleurs australasiens.

The cuckoo-shrikes are a widespread group of passerines characteristic of the Old World tropics and some adjacent temperate regions. Traditionally, they have been placed within the Campephagidae, most species in the genus *Coracina*. Despite their relative familiarity to birdwatchers, the family is comparatively little known but available information suggests a peculiarly slow and colourful development of the young. The *Birds of Africa* family summary[1] notes that the nestling is usually white, replaced by plumage similar to the adult female following the first moult. In most species, the female appears like a duller version of the male, so such a sequence is not unexpected. However, some species outside continental Africa show very well-marked sexual colour differences, and it might be doubted that such males would bear an immature plumage quite unlike the one either before or after it.

The Mauritius Cuckoo-Shrike *Coracina typica* is one such strongly sexually dichromatic species, which forms a species pair with the similar *Coracina newtoni* of Réunion; they differ mainly in vocalisations and the underparts plumage of adult females (barred brown on white in Réunion, plain orange-rufous in Mauritius). This note complements a paper[6] on the biology of the Mauritius species, principally by presenting the first photographs of the nest, eggs, and nestling and juvenile plumages. Only a poor, monochrome illustration of the nest and eggs has been previously published[2], although the juvenile was correctly illustrated in 1866[5], with an accurate description appearing more recently[1]. For completeness, the beautiful, 1866 painting of the juvenile, together with the adults, is reproduced as the front cover to the bulletin.

Nest and eggs

The nest (Fig. 1) is a very shallow cup, almost a platform, of fine twigs, lacking a soft lining but with lichen flakes attached to the outer part. The eggs are pale green, much speckled with brown, and typical clutch size is 2–3.

Nestlings

Incubation lasts c24 days, and the nestlings are largely pinkish and white, with darker areas hinting at the future plumage pattern (Fig. 2).

Juvenile

The young fledge after 24 days. The attractive juvenile plumage is very unlike any adult plumage, due to the buff feather edgings and pinkish underparts with fine darker streaking (Figs. 3–4 and front cover).

Sub-adult

Juvenile body plumage is lost within c2 months of fledging, to be replaced by orange-brown feathers above and rich orange-rufous below. However, in at least some males, the underparts become partly whitish.

Adult

Mauritius Cuckoo-Shrike appears not to gain full adult plumage until the complete moult at the end of the first complete breeding season, over a year after hatching. The adult male is grey above and greyish white below, with blackish wings, while the brown and orange female resembles the sub-adult (see front cover).

The plumages therefore do, indeed, follow the sequence predicted by *Birds of Africa*[1]. Females quickly gain an adult-like plumage, whereas males take over a year to do so, changing from pale and scaly, through brown and orange, to grey and black. The slow development, typical of the family, is also shown to apply to the Mauritius species: the period from egg-laying to fledging occupies c50 days, and, in the brood that I followed most closely, juvenile dependency lasted at least three months. Other Mauritian passerines, including the larger Mauritius Black Bulbul *Hypsipetes olivaceus*, develop more swiftly, supporting the idea that this is a characteristic of cuckoo-shrikes rather than an adaptation to the Mauritian environment.

Figure 1. Nest and eggs of Mauritius Cuckoo-Shrike *Coracina typica*, Brise Fer forest, Mauritius, November 1991 (Colin Taylor)

Figure 2. Nestlings of Mauritius Cuckoo-Shrike *Coracina typica*, Brise Fer forest, Mauritius, November 1991 (Colin Taylor)

Figure 3. Juvenile Mauritius Cuckoo-Shrike *Coracina typica*, Brise Fer forest, Mauritius, January 1991 (Roger Safford)

Figure 4. Juvenile Mauritius Cuckoo-Shrike *Coracina typica*, Brise Fer forest, Mauritius, January 1991 (Roger Safford)

The sexual dichromatism is itself worthy of comment. The male plumage is unexceptional for *Coracina* but the female is unlike any Asian or African *Coracina* species. However, two Australasian species, the Slender-billed Cicadabird *Coracina tenuirostris* and Grey-headed (or Black-tipped) Cuckoo-Shrike *Coracina schisticeps* are similar[1]. The similarity might indicate a common origin for Mascarene and Australasian birds, or be due to convergence; if the latter is the case, the reason is mysterious. Furthermore, in both Australasian species, females are barred below like Réunion Cuckoo-Shrike in some races, but have plain underparts like the Mauritian species in others[3]. Therefore, plumage differences between the two Mascarene species are similar to those between subspecies in Australasia. However, vocalisations are sufficiently distinct to justify maintaining the Mascarene species pair as full species.

Acknowledgements

Thanks are due to the British Ornithologists' Union for permission to reproduce the plate from *Ibis*, Colin Taylor for permission to use his photographs and to Rod Martins for comments on a draft.

References

1. Benson, C.W. 1971. Notes on *Terpsiphone* and *Coracina* spp. in the Malagasy region. *Bull. Br. Ornithol. Cl.* 91: 56–64.
2. Carié, P. 1921. Le merle cuisinier de l'Ile Maurice (*Lalage rufiventer* Sw.). *Rev. Hist. Nat. Appl., Oiseau* 2: 2–5.
3. Coates, B.J. 1990. *The Birds of Papua New Guinea.* Vol 2. Alderley, Queensland: Dove Publications.
4. Keith, S., Urban, E.K. and Fry, C.H. (eds) *The Birds of Africa.* Vol 4. London, UK: Academic Press.
5. Pollen, F.P.L. 1866. On the genus *Oxynotus* of Mauritius and Réunion. *Ibis New Series* 2: 275–280.
6. Safford, R.J. and Beaumont, J. 1996. Observations on the biology of the Mauritius Cuckoo-shrike *Coracina typica*. *Ostrich* 67: 15–22.
7. Smythies, B.E. 1985. Cuckoo-shrike. In Campbell, B. and Lack, E. (eds) *A Dictionary of Birds.* Calton: T. & A. D. Poyser.

Royal Holloway Institute for Environmental Research, University of London, Huntersdale, Callow Hill, Virginia Water, Surrey GU25 4LN, UK.